Fear Factor

How Safe Is It to Make Time for Family?

By Kelly Ward and Lisa Wolf-Wendel

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Policies supporting family involvement among faculty may be in place. Making sure that they will be used is another matter.

Meet Amy. She’s a thirty-six-year-old second-year professor at Flagship University and an emerging scholar in her field. She’s been married for two years and is ready to start a family. She’s not so prepared in terms of her career, but she’s ready in terms of her biological clock. She’s worried if she continues to wait to have children, her fertility might pass her by, especially since she wants to have more than one child. Although Amy wished for a May baby, she got pregnant sooner than expected and is due in February. Her husband, an attorney who recently joined a prominent law firm, doesn’t feel he has enough clout to take time off. Amy didn’t really want to take leave during the semester, but things have gotten complicated with the February due date. She plans to work until she has the baby and then have someone cover her classes the three weeks until spring break in March. Her mother will come for a couple of weeks to care for the baby so that she can go back to work after spring break and finish the semester. If Amy can make it to the end of the semester, she figures she’ll be fine. She will take the summer off from teaching but is hopeful of writing. She plans to resume a full schedule in the fall.

Amy talked to her department chair about options for taking a leave and was informed that she is free to take leave for the whole semester but that it would be unpaid, beyond what she has saved for sick time (which isn’t much since she is new). Taking unpaid leave is not really a financial option, and she is nervous about depleting her sick time in case she or the baby gets sick in the future. She’s also worried about how it would look to take time off so soon after getting to campus. What will her colleagues think if she’s not around? She has asked how other people have handled their pregnancies and learned of only one person who took a leave, but that person left the university afterward. At this juncture, Amy feels as if she can do it all without a leave. She noticed a provision in the faculty handbook that allows stopping of the tenure clock for a year for the birth of a child, but, at this point, she’s thinking it is better to avoid that. She feels as if she is getting herself established, and since her department chair didn’t mention the tenure clock, she figures it’s best not to either.

Amy is part of a growing cohort of new faculty who want to combine work and family while on the tenure track. A recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education called the current state of affairs, in which so many faculty members are having babies, academic’s “baby boom.” Historically, the Amy of the world opted to forgo children (and many times marriage or romantic partnerships) in the interest of their academic careers. Today, tenure-track women like Amy have two main decisions to make: first, whether to have a baby while on the tenure track, and second, what to do about work once the baby has arrived.

Biological and tenure clocks have the unfortunate tendency to tick loudly, clearly, and at the same time. The average age at which faculty earn the PhD is thirty-four, putting the tenure decision at about age forty, just when a woman’s fertility is in serious decline. As more women enter the academic profession as assistant professors, more of them are choosing to combine work and family, while on the tenure track. This trend does not mean that women professors are not serious about their careers. What it does mean, however, is that the landscape and the nuances of the academic labor force are changing.

Have policies within higher education kept up with these changes? What are academic institutions doing to accommodate women like Amy? Are they left to fend for themselves? From a practice and policy perspective, what can institutions do to help faculty meaningfully combine an academic career and a personal life that includes children? This article addresses these questions in three ways: we first provide an overview of the literature about work and family policies for faculty in higher education; we then discuss the challenges of creating policies and encouraging faculty to use them; and, finally, we suggest courses of action for different campus stakeholders who are likely to influence the policy and work environment for faculty.

The Literature
There are three general emphases within the literature on faculty work and family concerns: (1) an examination of policies that have been implemented; (2) an analysis of the extent to which policies are used; and (3) prescriptions for policies needed to help faculty balance work and family responsibilities.

Based on a survey of chief academic officers at 191 colleges and universities in the mid-1990s, sociologist Phyllis Raabe found that 84 percent provided unpaid maternity leave, 74 percent provided paid maternity leave, 47 percent had on-campus child care, 21 percent offered financial assistance for child care, 36 percent permitted flexible scheduling to meet family needs, and 29 percent allowed expansion of time to tenure for family-related reasons.

A more recent study (described in this issue) by Carol Hollenhead of the Center for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan shows that academic policies have continued to improve. She found that 88 percent provided maternity leave, 60 percent provided paternity leave, 41 percent had on-campus child care, and 9 percent paid for child care.

In summary, the findings of these studies show that although some progress has been made in providing family-friendly policies, there is still room for improvement. Institutions need to continue to strive for balance and flexibility in their policies to support faculty members as they balance work and family responsibilities.
University of Michigan indicates that research universities are more likely than other types of institutions to have “family friendly” policies. The most common solutions in her study did not involve financial costs, such as institution-wide policies permitting stopping of the tenure clock and unpaid leaves in excess of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Not surprisingly, policies that had costs were less common; relatively few institutions offered paid leave for dependent care or allowed faculty to modify their duties, take on part-time appointments, or develop job-sharing arrangements. Another national study of parental leave by politics professor Steve Rhodes and Charmaine Yoest, director of the Family, Gender, and Tenure Project at the University of Virginia, found that private institutions are more likely than public colleges and universities to have leave policies.

Unfortunately, numerous studies have found that faculty typically undervalue work-family policies. Many policies are still new, and faculty don’t know whether they can take advantage of them without hurting their chances of earning tenure. Faculty members, especially women, go to great lengths to avoid being seen as “in need of assistance” while on the tenure track, which prevents some women faculty members from even having a child. Those who do have children often avoid using available policies for fear of reprisal. Robert Drago, a scholar of labors studies, industrial relations, and women’s studies, and his colleagues refer to this hesitancy as “bias-avoidance” behavior. Similarly, higher education researchers Susan Finkel, Steven Olswang, and Nian She surveyed faculty members at a research university and found that although most faculty members support paid leave for women faculty for childbirth, unpaid leave for ongoing infant care, and stopping of the tenure clock, these same faculty members say that taking leave would hurt them professionally. As a result, among those the researchers surveyed who had children (almost 50 percent), only a small percentage took leave.

Our own research substantiates these findings. In 2002, we interviewed 120 women faculty members on the tenure track with children (representing four institutional types). We learned that managing work and family occurred in spite of institutional policies, not because of them.

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required by the FMLA; providing paid leave of up to twelve weeks for birth or adoption for men and women distinct from sick, vacation, or short term disability leave; permitting modified duties (e.g., release from teaching responsibilities) for a defined period to accommodate dependent care; allowing the tenure clock to stop for up to two years for faculty with primary or co-primary caregiving responsibilities (such a stoppage can be tied to taking family leave), introducing “designer” (i.e., flexible) tenure clocks for academic careers that include centralized (as opposed to departmental) stop-clock policies or extended tenure clocks; offering part-time tenure-track options; and maintaining affordable and accessible child care on campus or providing on-campus referral for child care services.

Recent studies of work-family policies have described an “integrative model” in which employers adopt a series of policies that can be used alone or in combination with one another as needed by employees. Such a model recognizes the way people work and supports the coherence of work and home lives.

The Fear Factor
Reviewing the literature on work and family concerns gives rise to an important question: what good is a policy if it is not used? Campuses know what to do to help new mothers, and many are doing it, yet faculty hesitate to use the policies available to them. This reluctance is a bona fide dilemma, the genesis of which, we believe, is fear.

Administrators fear favoring one group over another: privileging women over men; those with children over those without them; and newer faculty over more senior colleagues. Some senior faculty members (both men and women) who did not have access to work-family policies in their careers have suggested that providing “extra” assistance to newer generations of faculty lets them off easy by not making them survive the rigors of tenure without assistance. These types of concerns can stymie department chairs, deans, and provosts interested in creating and implementing policies to help parents.

Questions about the financial implications of certain policies may lead administrators to decline to implement them. But financial costs are not the only concern. Some administrators worry that formal policies will limit their ability to respond creatively to unique situations; they prefer to respond to situations as they occur. Unfortunately, flexibility often translates into disparity in how individuals are accommodated; some faculty members are granted much more than others. Further, some fear the cost to institutional reputation if policies are perceived to lower the bar for achieving tenure—leaving campuses feeling they don’t “measure up” to the standards of the most prestigious institutions. Sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell have suggested that although prestigious institutions are free to create innovative policies, campuses that aspire upward hesitate to tinker with their policies, thinking that doing so could affect their ability to achieve academic legitimacy.
Changing the tenure process is particularly risky. Many suggestions for work and family policies call for maintaining tenure while making the process for earning it less strict and rigid. In an era in which academic credibility is often challenged and tenure is threatened, however, administrators do not feel they can protect the sanctity of tenure while simultaneously arguing for its alteration.

The culture of fear that stops faculty from using policies is rooted in similar concerns. Faculty members ask, “How can I be a serious scholar worthy of tenure if I want to alter the tenure process?” We disagree that advocating changes in the tenure process indicates that someone is not serious about her career. The process has remained pretty much the same since the inception of tenure: a person earns her doctorate, typically starts her academic career as an assistant professor, and, after a five or six years of probation, she applies for promotion and tenure.

In the past, success in an academic career meant adhering to this timeline. The structure of tenure came of age when the profession was organized according to traditional familial norms that placed men in the workplace and women at home with children. The “ideal worker” in academia was married to his or her career. When women like Amy interrupt the traditional career ladder and its prescribed order by taking leave or stopping the tenure clock, they must consider how they will maintain their legitimacy as faculty members. Our research and other studies suggest that most faculty members like Amy skirt the question by using the bias-avoidance strategies we referred to earlier. In extreme cases, women will not have a baby at all, have a baby in the summer, or return to work as soon after birth as possible without missing any (or very little) work. Such choices assume a woman can plan her due date to coincide with the academic calendar and rely on an ideal pregnancy in which the baby arrives on time and without complications. Feeling obligated to plan in this way puts work and family in opposition to one another. Failure to help faculty integrate work and family more smoothly could compromise higher education’s ability to recruit and retain quality faculty members.

Next Steps
What must take place on college campuses for administrators to create and implement policies and for faculty to feel free to use them? Our research and the literature make clear that both have to happen. If policies are underused, administrators have little incentive to expand them.

Top-level academic administrators need to do their part by establishing a positive climate for balancing work and family responsibilities. They need to make the campus aware of shifting faculty demographics and how the presence of more women faculty (which prevails on almost every campus) calls for rethinking processes like the tenure track and parental leave. Provosts must make sure policies are in place, educate deans and department chairs about them, and provide examples of how they work. Of course, line items must be included in the budget to cover adjuncts for parental leaves so that department chairs will be more apt to present them as an option. Judith Gappa and Shelly McDermaid of Purdue University, in a 1997 working paper titled Work, Family, and the Faculty Career, suggest that institutions should continually assess work-family concerns, engage in campus dialogue about them, appoint task forces to consider ways to create and implement policies, and tap into existing networks to find solutions to deal with specific work-family situations.

Department chairs play probably the most important role in helping faculty negotiate work and family. Chairs need to know policies, apply them fairly, and educate their faculty about their use. Information needs to be communicated to faculty members who may use the policies as well as to senior professors who evaluate their colleagues for promotion and tenure. Department chairs need to maintain an atmosphere in which policy issues can be discussed forthrightly. Colleagues are also important. Senior faculty can be mentors to junior colleagues who are raising young children, helping them learn about and make use of available policies. Further, because of the role of senior faculty in evaluating colleagues for tenure, they are crucial to creating a climate in which faculty can safely take advantage of family-support policies.

Junior colleagues are no less important. Fellow junior faculty members who begrudge their colleagues for using work-family policies create a negative climate for those combining work and family.

Conceptions of the academic career that see work and family as “either-or” propositions—that is, that faculty can have a career or a family, but not both—do not bode well for the future of the academic profession. Recent research by higher education professor Ann Austin, Chris Golde of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and chemistry professor Timothy Dore suggests that for graduate students considering academic careers, the ability to combine work and family is a major concern. At research universities, where most graduate students are socialized to the academic culture, students witness their professors grappling with decisions about how to combine their careers with the needs of a spouse and the desire to have a child. Faculty members like Amy become role models to graduate students. If such faculty have children, take a leave, stop the tenure clock, and then get on with their careers without repercussions, one message is sent. But if they choose not to have a baby because of worries about tenure, or if they take time off and become the subject of negative hall way conversations, another, far more indelible message is sent. We hope campuses will look forthrightly at their work-family policies, so that this second message will no longer be sent and so that talented faculty like Amy can combine a successful career and a personal life that includes children.

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